

WHO IS YOUR NEIGHBOR? II
Amos 5:18-24; Matthew 22:37-40, 25:1-13

Today we will continue our look at the question: "Who is my neighbor?" As we explore what Jesus has said to his disciples and to others in issuing the command in Matthew 22:37-40; "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Today we look at these verses beside the verses from Matthew 25:1-13:

Few human events are more emotionally weighted than weddings. Parents invest heavily – time, energy, creativity, resources, love, and hope – in the marriage ceremony for a beloved son or daughter. In the midst of all these emotionally charged plans, things can and usually do go wrong. It is significant that near the end of his life and ministry, Jesus chose this most human, optionally loaded event as the context for a parable about the kingdom: "The kingdom of heaven will be like this."

It helps to know a bit about the wedding customs of that day. In Jesus' day weddings were every bit as emotionally freighted as ours today, with the same potential for mishap. Guests assembled at the home of the bride and were entertained by her parents while waiting for the groom. When the bridegroom approached, the guests, including the bridesmaids, lighted torches and went out to greet him. In a festive procession, the entire party walked to the groom's home where his parents were waiting for the ceremony and the extended banquet that would follow and continue for several days.

In this parable, for whatever reason, the bridegroom does not come on time, the hours pass, and many of the wedding party fell asleep. Finally, at midnight, they are awakened by a shout, "He's coming!" The bridesmaids leap into action, trim their lamps, and head out to greet him. Five of the ten have used up their oil and have no reserves. They attempt to borrow oil from the others but are rejected. Jesus concludes this parable with, "Keep awake, you do not know the day or the hour."

The early Christians had to adjust to the reality that Jesus did not return as they expected, and that their mission was to wait expectantly, while living faithfully, courageously, and hopefully. That is our mission still.

The point is living expectantly and hopefully and, in the end, Jesus says, those on their way to heaven will be decided by what they gave away, whether they fed the poor, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned, loved their neighbor. Whether they shared what they had. Whether they shared their oil.

But, there are some kinds of oil you can't borrow from anyone else. Teenagers learn this, at a certain point; you can borrow someone's homework and get by on the assignment, but you can't borrow the hours they put in studying for the test. There are some kinds of preparation we can only do for ourselves. There are some reserves that no one else can build up for us.

You can't borrow someone else's peace of mind or their passion for God. You can't say to your friend, "You have such a happy marriage, don't you? Could you give me some of that?" It doesn't work. You have to find it yourself. You have to figure out what fills you up, spiritually, and then make sure you have some to carry with you, every single minute of the day, because that's how often you'll need it.

And here's the thing: you will run out. Time will run out. The hour gets late, everyone gets sleepy. We all doze, we all put it off, saying, "One of these days, I'm going to quit working so hard and I'll put in that quality time with my kids." "One of these days, I'm going to volunteer at the elementary school to help the children learn to read. I've always wanted to do it." "One of these days, I'm going to stop writing checks and really get involved with the homeless."

We all doze. We all put it off. And then the shout goes up: "He's coming!" It's time. And one of these days is today, and it's over, and you never did bring your flask of oil.

I think that's one of the hardest things about this parable. The time will come when you have to draw on the oil you have, right there, on your body, in your flask. And it isn't going to come from your savings; and it isn't going to come from your good intentions and your long-range plans; it's going to come from what fuels you spiritually right now. It's going to come from where you see God, today. And where is that? Well, Jesus tells us. I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was in prison, and you visited me. I was sick, and you comforted me. That's where we find him. All of those things that we can't check out of the library, and we can't borrow from our neighbor next door. As we wait with hope and expectation, we seek to serve and love others: our neighbor's as ourselves.